

Today makes it official: '88 drought - worst ever

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Start taking pictures of the curled corn and apple-less orchards so you can show your grandchildren when they ask about the Great Drought of '88.

The record books will certainly remember this spring. Today Madison sets a record for the longest dry spell since record keeping began in 1869.

Madison's stretch of 35 days without precipitation breaks the record set in the winter of 1939-1940 and far surpasses the longest drought for this normally lush time of year — a trifling string of 23 days in the summer of 1873. It hasn't rained in Madison since a measly 0.02 of an inch fell May 12. Most areas haven't seen rain since the Mother's Day storm on May 8.

Old-timers say the Dust Bowl summer of 1934 was the worst drought in memory, but State Climatologist Douglas Clark said that summer never actually had as long a string of dry days.

For some, this weather has rekindled memories of the Dust Bowl.

"There were days when you could hardly see the sun with all the dust that blew in from the Western states," remembered John Koch, 79, who

farmed near Ashton in northwestern Dane County. "If we had a 90-degree day it was a real cool-off. Most days it was 100 or 101."

Jay Patten, 67, who farms north of Boscobel in Crawford County, won't forget 1934, either.

"That year comes to mind as the year our house burned down," he said.

It was so dry that spring that when a burning wad of paper flew out of the farmhouse chimney, the wood shingle roof instantly caught fire. Patten spent that summer felling trees to make lumber for a new house.

"As soon as you'd fell a tree, you'd have to watch out because here would come the cows to eat the leaves," he said.

At another Crawford County farm that summer, trees became a regular part of the cows' diet. Jerry Anderson remembers hearing his late father, Orvin, talk about the summer when the pastures burned up and what little hay survived was hoarded for the winter.

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"They'd drop one tree every day to feed the cows," he said.

After this year, Anderson figures he may have a few tales to tell his grandchildren. The small creek at his home near Fennimore in Grant County has nearly dried up.

"When I was walking in the woods I noticed there are green leaves on the ground," he said. "I've never seen that happen before."

This year some orchard owners are seeing apples actually fall off the trees in reaction to the stress. And while most of the area's corn will still revive with a good rain, a longer drought could result in some strange looking cornfields. Dane County Extension Agent Tom O'Connell said if it stays hot and dry for long enough, corn will begin to tassel even if it's only knee-high.

"If you don't have any moisture at tasseling time," he said, "you won't have any ears or maybe you'll get nubbin ears with just a few kernels."